

**AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings of claims in the application:

Claim 1 (Currently Amended): A dried hydrogel, prepared by polymerizing an olefinically unsaturated carboxylic acid or its salts in a polymerization reaction mixture; admixing the polymerization reaction mixture, before, during or after the polymerization and before drying, with an alkali metal silicate of the general formula I



wherein M is an alkali metal and n is from 0.5 to 4; postcrosslinking a resulting polymer in which said silicate is evenly distributed; thereby obtaining a hydrogel containing said postcrosslinked polymer; and drying said hydrogel at an elevated temperature, to obtain said dried hydrogel; wherein said postcrosslinking is effected by a crosslinker which is a compound containing two or more groups that form covalent bonds with the carboxyl groups of said polymer; wherein said polymer is prepared by admixing said alkali metal silicate in an amount of from 0.05% by weight to 20% by weight, reckoned on SiO<sub>2</sub> and based on a total monomer weight.

Claim 2 (Canceled):

Claim 3 (Canceled):

Claim 4 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel as claimed in claim 1, prepared by admixing said hydrogel after said polymerization with a mixture of an alkali metal silicate and an alkali metal hydroxide, to thereby neutralize said polymer contained in said hydrogel.

Claim 5 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel as claimed in claim 1, prepared by admixing said hydrogel after said polymerization with a mixture of an alkali metal silicate and an alkali metal carbonate, to thereby neutralize said polymer contained in said hydrogel.

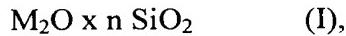
Claim 6 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel as claimed in claim 1, prepared by neutralizing said polymer contained in said hydrogel to a pH of from 3.5 to 9.0.

Claim 7 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel as claimed in claim 1, wherein a drying temperature is in the range from 40°C to 300°C.

Claims 8-9. (Cancelled)

Claim 10 (Currently Amended): A process for preparing dried hydrogel particles, comprising:  
polymerizing an olefinically unsaturated carboxylic acid or its salts in a polymerization reaction mixture, to obtain a solid gel containing a polymer;

admixing the polymerization reaction mixture before or during the polymerization or admixing said solid gel with an alkali metal silicate of the general formula I



wherein M is an alkali metal and n is from 0.5 to 4;  
thereby obtaining particles of a gel in which said silicate is evenly distributed;  
postcrosslinking said particles of the gel; and  
drying said particles of the gel at an elevated temperature, to obtain said dried hydrogel particles;

wherein said postcrosslinking is effected by a crosslinker which is a compound containing two or more groups that form covalent bonds with the carboxyl groups of said particles of the gel;

wherein said polymer is prepared by admixing said alkali metal silicate in an amount of from 0.05% by weight to 20% by weight, reckoned on SiO<sub>2</sub> and based on a total monomer weight.

Claim 11 (Previously Presented): A method for absorbing aqueous solutions, dispersions and emulsions, comprising:

contacting the dried hydrogel according to claim 1 with an aqueous solution, dispersion or emulsion.

Claim 12 (Previously Presented): An article, comprising:  
the dried hydrogel according to Claim 1;  
said article being capable of absorbing an aqueous fluid.

Claim 13 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel according to claim 1 which is capable of absorbing an aqueous fluid.

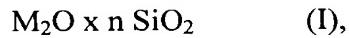
Claim 14 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel according to claim 1, wherein said olefinically unsaturated carboxylic acid is selected from the group consisting of acrylic acid, methacrylic acid, crotonic acid, 2-acryl-amido-2-methylpropanesulfonic acid, 2-acryl-amido-2-methylpropanephosphonic acid, vinylphosphonic acid and mixtures thereof.

Claim 15. (Canceled)

Claim 16 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel according to claim 1, wherein M in formula (I) is sodium.

Claim 17 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel according to claim 1, wherein M in formula (I) is potassium.

Claim 18 (Currently Amended): Dried hydrogel particles, prepared by polymerizing an olefinically unsaturated carboxylic acid or its salt in a polymerization reaction mixture, to obtain a solid gel containing a polymer; admixing said solid gel with an alkali metal silicate of the general formula I



wherein M is an alkali metal and n is from 0.5 to 4;

thereby obtaining particles of a gel in which said silicate is evenly distributed;  
postcrosslinking said particles of the gel;  
drying said particles of the gel at an elevated temperature, to obtain said dried hydrogel particles;

wherein said postcrosslinking is effected by a crosslinker which is a compound containing two or more groups that form covalent bonds with the carboxyl groups of said particles of the gel;

wherein said polymer is prepared by admixing said alkali metal silicate in an amount of from 0.05% by weight to 20% by weight, reckoned on SiO<sub>2</sub> and based on a total monomer weight.

Claim 19. (Canceled)

Claim 20 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel according to claim 1, wherein said polymer is water-insoluble.

Claim 21 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel according to claim 1, wherein said polymer is a copolymer.

22. (Canceled)

Claim 23 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel according to claim 1, wherein said alkali metal silicate is soluble in water.

Claim 24 (Previously Presented): The dried hydrogel according to claim 1, wherein said alkali metal silicate is admixed with said polymerization reaction mixture after the polymerization and before drying.

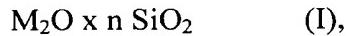
Claim 25 (Currently Amended): A dried hydrogel, prepared by polymerizing an olefinically unsaturated carboxylic acid or its salts in a polymerization reaction mixture; admixing the polymerization reaction mixture, before or during the polymerization and before drying, with an alkali metal silicate of the general formula I



wherein M is an alkali metal and n is from 0.5 to 4; postcrosslinking a resulting polymer in which said silicate is evenly distributed; thereby obtaining a hydrogel containing said postcrosslinked polymer; and drying said hydrogel at an elevated temperature, to obtain said dried hydrogel; wherein said postcrosslinking is effected by a crosslinker which is a compound containing two or more groups that form covalent bonds with the carboxyl groups of said polymer;  
wherein said polymer is prepared by admixing said alkali metal silicate in an amount of from 0.05% by weight to 20% by weight, reckoned on SiO<sub>2</sub> and based on a total monomer weight.

Claim 26 (Currently Amended): A process for preparing dried hydrogel particles, comprising:

polymerizing an olefinically unsaturated carboxylic acid or its salts in a polymerization reaction mixture, to obtain a solid gel containing a polymer; admixing the polymerization reaction mixture before or during the polymerization with an alkali metal silicate of the general formula I



wherein M is an alkali metal and n is from 0.5 to 4; thereby obtaining particles of a gel in which said silicate is evenly distributed; postcrosslinking said particles of the gel; and drying said particles of the gel at an elevated temperature, to obtain said dried hydrogel particles;

wherein said postcrosslinking is effected by a crosslinker which is a compound containing two or more groups that form covalent bonds with the carboxyl groups of said particles of the gel;

wherein said polymer is prepared by admixing said alkali metal silicate in an amount of from 0.05% by weight to 20% by weight, reckoned on SiO<sub>2</sub> and based on a total monomer weight.